



Good afternoon, Senator Cassano, Representative Jutila, and members of the GAE Committee. My name is Melissa Russell, and I am a Registrar of Voters in Bethlehem, and also the president of the Registrars of Voters Association of Connecticut (ROVAC). ROVAC is a membership organization representing 162 municipalities, with 636 members consisting of registrars of voters and their deputies. I am here today on behalf of ROVAC to give testimony in opposition to SB1051, An Act Strengthening Connecticut's Elections.

SB1051 is a large bill with several things in it that ROVAC can support and would like to work with the legislature and the Secretary of the State's office in implementing.

However, the main premise of this bill calls for a fundamental change in how elections will be administered: namely, switching from each municipality having an elected registrar from each major party (Democratic and Republican) to the legislative body of each municipality appointing, in conjunction with the town clerk, a single registrar, and placing the whole office of the registrar under the authority of said clerk. This is a change that ROVAC strongly opposes – upon learning of this proposal, our members were surveyed, and over 96% of them expressed their opposition to a single, appointed registrar system.

One of the fundamental premises of our government is to have a system of checks and balances, and that is just as true in our electoral process as it is in every other aspect of government. It is essential that there be two sets of eyes monitoring every step of the preparations for Election day, such as the conduct of supervised absentee ballots, training poll workers from both parties, testing the memory cards and ballots, setting the tabulators up and delivering the supplies to the polls, to name a few.

A single appointed registrar would eliminate these checks and balances. A single appointed registrar would be beholden to a single majority party in their municipality and that party's political desires, rather than accountable to the voters. In a town or a city where one party is dominant over another, the minority party's voice would be completely lost in the election process. And in a municipality where the majority party changes every few years, the registrar would change along with them as new administrations appoint new registrars. The consistency and experience of administering the registrar's duties throughout the year would be lost.

Consider, too, the ramifications of having a single appointed registrar in the case of primaries and town committee caucuses. The minority party in the municipality would be dependent on an appointee from the opposite party to conduct their party's internal election activities. This is hardly a desirable or viable situation.

All this is not to say that our election process and the office of the registrars is perfect and doesn't need room for improvement. ROVAC recognizes that there are underlying issues that need to be addressed, and we are pleased to see several initiatives we support in this bill. ROVAC and its members are committed to instilling trust in the role of the registrars, thereby ensuring an open, fair and equitable election process, whether in a statewide or municipal election, primary, or local referenda.

SB1051 calls for the certification of registrars in Section 13. This is an issue that ROVAC has long advocated for. Our mission statement reads, in part, that "ROVAC must create an environment for Election Administrators where ongoing training will lead to certification." So we obviously support the concept of certification, while keeping the Registrars of Voters Association of Connecticut as a part of the certification committee selection process. We also believe that this program should be open not only to registrars and their deputies, but to their assistants and anyone else who desires to become familiar with how a registrars' office and duties work. More education for more people can never be a bad thing.

Section 16 of this bill calls for the posting of Connecticut's ID requirements at each polling place. This is something that ROVAC supports, as a reminder to the poll workers and the public of the specific and varied forms of identification that a voter can present when coming in to vote, whether for the first time, once every four years in a Presidential election, or as a lifetime elector who never misses even local budget referenda.

ROVAC also supports, conceptually, Sections 19 through 22 of SB1051, which would allow for a two phase reporting of the results and statistics that are recorded at the end of an election. The Head Moderator's report that gets filed with the Town Clerk and sent to the Secretary of the State has much more than just the raw numbers – it also contains statistics such as percentage of turnout in each precinct, the number of absentee and same day registration ballots, and currently, the party assignation of "unknown" votes. In the past few years, Connecticut's registrars have observed a trend where the number of candidates who are cross endorsed has increased significantly.

It is the compilation of these statistics as a result of this trend that take the majority of the time at the end of the night, while the public and the candidates impatiently wait for the results. The above mentioned sections in this bill address that problem, although we would like to see some minor changes made to this language that would better reflect how the end of election reporting is actually conducted, and which also confirms that all filing time frames are consistent – in particular with respect to provisional ballots.

In conclusion, while SB1051 is a bill that ROVAC must oppose on the grounds that we believe a single appointed registrar instead of our current dual elected registrar system will undermine the democratic process that is so crucial to our elections and create a political, partisan atmosphere instead of a transparent, bipartisan one, there are sections of this bill that ROVAC is supportive of, and we are eager to be a partner and a resource in creating the changes necessary to truly strengthen Connecticut's elections.

On today's agenda there are several other bills – HB6950, SB1041, HB6900 – for which we will be speaking in favor or offering constructive comments.

For your information and clarification, I have attached to my testimony a presentation on the role of registrars in our municipalities.

I thank you for your attention and your thoughtful consideration of our members' ideas and opinions.